

# ***Lutheran Mission Matters***



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# God Still Answers Questions and Prayers

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**Abstract:** This article is a revised version of David Maier’s presentation at the annual banquet of the Lutheran Society for Missiology in St. Louis on January 29, 2019. In it, he views the expanse of God’s redemptive history from Pentecost (Acts 2) through the description of the Church Triumphant in Revelations 7, highlighting the encouraging picture of the “intercultural” church. God’s people, in whatever “time” or place they live, should not be fearful in their witness, but fully trust God and His Word, which are powerful beyond our imagining. The Holy Spirit still gifts the priesthood to accomplish divine purposes.

I am grateful for this opportunity to be with you, and in particular to present some considerations for earnest contemplation, prayer, and conviction regarding the Mission of God (*Missio Dei*).

## Full of Joy, Are We Ready to Face Persecution . . . OR Are We Afraid?

Although there are many who question the influence of the Christian Church today and feel as if we are undergoing some form of suppression, intimidation, and/or discrimination—and this may be true—it is good to remember that the Apostle John wrote the Book of Revelation to encourage Christians who were enduring horrible, unimaginable persecution, and even martyrdom. Christians were being sold into slavery. They were being fed to lions, burned at the stake, and



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crucified because they believed in Jesus and His resurrection. Not only did they believe in Jesus, they were absolutely convinced that there was nothing more important for them to do than tell other people about Jesus.

As with much of the persecution of Christians in the past, pagans today do not fear *what* an individual believes; they rather fear the *transformation* that occurs in believers and when *transformed believers* start living and spreading the Good News.

Think about what those believers faced as John wrote Revelation. Most of the known world was ruled by the Roman emperor. The emperors thought of themselves as deities. In some ways they *were* like gods. They had the power of life and death. They could make a slave a free man. They could make a free man a slave. They set the morality and the values of the nation. You could not own property, travel around the country, or choose whom and how you would worship without permission of the emperor. There was no free speech, no democracy, no free press.

*Talk about facing an impossible situation.*

Under these circumstances, how could you possibly share the Gospel when to do so meant the possibility of slavery or persecution or death? Why would your family, friends, or neighbors possibly want to hear about Jesus when to follow Jesus meant that you might be imprisoned or killed? What could those early Christians offer the nonbeliever? They had no buildings, pipe organs, or praise bands.

*All they had was Jesus and persecution. And JOY!*

Joy that is found only in Jesus! Joy that celebrates God's gift of forgiveness which brings new life, eternal life, and hope!

Yes, confessing/sharing the faith was a crime, but the greater crime would have been for them to keep silent and not share the certainty of salvation that was theirs in Jesus. Listen as John encourages the church under fire in Revelation 7:9–10: "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"

I can't wait for that day when the multitude, a multitude beyond number, gathers in praise of Jesus Christ. Imagine looking over a sea of people dressed in white, the

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thunderous sound of thousands upon thousands of voices declaring and singing like Lutherans, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

Did you notice another important point in John’s portrait of the return of Christ? The multi-cultured multitude cannot be counted! Numbers aren’t everything, they aren’t even the most important thing, but they say something about the growth of God’s kingdom. Twelve disciples grew by three thousand after Peter’s Pentecost sermon and Luke recounted, “The Lord added to their number daily those being saved” (Acts 2:47).

Church history indicates that mostly the additions came one person or one family at a time. A slave girl shared the Gospel with her master’s wife who also believed; and where there was one, now there were two. The master’s wife shared with her sisters; and where there were two, now there were almost a dozen and the cycle continued. Believers witnessed and discipled. The broken, the imprisoned, the poor, the fool, and the one who had nothing shared their treasure with those around them. And those who were rich in this world felt their poverty for the first time and fell on their knees before the cross.

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John takes us to the end of the sharing, the receiving, the believing . . . and there a massive number joins in *one voice* to proclaim the deity of Jesus.

Notice, too, that *the multitude no one could number* was made up of ALL tribes, peoples, and languages of the earth. The kingdom of God is not just about the United States or Europeans. It is not just about people who are comfortably different from anglo-Americans or anglo-Slavics. It also is inclusive of the Sudanese immigrant in the market where you shop; the Pakistani family that moved in down the street; the Muslim store owner and his family that live above the store on the corner; and, if you live in Detroit, of those living in the Muslim “area” that is forty-square blocks or more.

With his beautiful description, John dispels several myths that might leave us in fear:

- First, the myth that God’s kingdom will be diminished by the secular culture of this age or any age!
- Second, that the Gospel is not enough of an “incentive” for conversion. Really? It’s God’s *Word*, it’s God’s *power*, and it’s God’s *way*. Isaiah 55 reminds us: “So shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it” (v. 11).

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- Third, that the Gospel is limited by our language ability or comfort with other cultures. We might think we're limited; but the power of the cross of Christ and the Gospel that we bear and confess are NOT! The Holy Spirit is NOT!

I believe that the “intercultural” picture of the beginning of the New Testament Church at Pentecost—and the similar picture of the Church Triumphant before the throne and the Lamb—are the strongest of promises and encouragements that the Gospel has been, is, and will forever be “the power of God for salvation to *everyone* who believes” (Rom 1:16)!

Are we ready, as Peter encourages, to “sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pt 3:15); or, are we too fearful? Are we ready to endure? Are we living with the joy of the Lord?

### **Are We People of Peace?**

Are we open to the Holy Spirit’s encouragement and leading as suggested in Luke 10:1–7? There, Christ’s disciples were encouraged to be aware of, look for, and discover *the person(s) of peace* in the communities, contexts, and cultures around them *as we should be*—especially around the churches where we worship. In this passage He shares that strategy with the newly appointed seventy-two disciples, beginning with these words, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Lk 10:2).

Missionaries and church planters talk about finding “*persons of peace*” in a neighborhood, city, or marketplace. Often the person of peace—inevitably, a “kind” and “open” individual—will have friends and relatives who also have been prepared by God to be open to Gospel witness and are welcoming to followers of Jesus. Finding them is but one “tool of the trade” that assists us in locating those in whom God may be at work in a community. Often, these people or “households of peace” are like a gateway relationship into a family, neighborhood, community, or culture. Prayerfully seek them out as you live more intentionally.

While we’re not required by Scripture to use this approach, we can see this pattern or principle in the New Testament:

- The Centurion—Luke 7:1–10
- The Samaritan Woman—John 4:1–30
- The Ethiopian Eunuch—Acts 8:26–40
- Cornelius—Acts 10:9–11
- Lydia—Acts 16:13–15
- The Philippian Jailer—Acts 16:22–38

Here's another *equally important* question: Are WE “persons of peace” in the contexts, cultures, and communities in which God has placed us? Would we be recognized as such? God deliberately chose the time and place in which we live. As Paul reasoned every day in the synagogues and marketplace in Athens, he was taken by those intersecting with him to the Areopagus—a kind of “open court,” the “*Judge Judy*” studio of the day—where he confidently states: “And He [God] made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their [OUR] appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist” (Act 17:26–28).

God's wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit, who gave Peter his bold message at Pentecost and inspired Paul with his courageous words and witness in the Areopagus, makes this promise: If you are “*in Christ*” (Cf. Rom 6:1–14; Phil 4:13)—*ἐν Χριστῷ*—through the waters of Holy Baptism and/or the hearing of the Word of God, God's Spirit *is in you* and will speak *through you* (Lk 12:11–12). Jesus intimated the same at the start of His ministry. In His first sermon by the Galilean Sea, He told His listeners: “You are the salt of the earth; . . . You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden” (Mt 5:13–14).

At Pentecost more than a hundred people spoke, each one proclaiming “the mighty deeds of God” (Acts 2:11) in a different language. Fifteen *different* people groups are mentioned with *different* languages and dialects. But all those present hear the disciples speaking in their native tongues a singular, multifaceted message: “*the mighty deeds of God.*” Is it possible that on Pentecost Thomas further describes “grace” in Farci? Or Matthew explains “mercy” to Jews who have pilgrimaged from various countries? Maybe John explains “God's *ἀγάπη*” to some Roman visitors? Bartholomew expounds on the meaning of the cross and proclaims the resurrection to the Cappadocians. Possibly, James talks with those from Asia and Pontus about how God saved Noah and his family from the flood.

Some in the crowd accused the disciples of early-morning inebriation, while others were similarly cynical. But others were amazed and asked a good, familiar, Lutheran question: “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:12).

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It's a great question! Crowded city. Prayerful, awe-filled, joyful, believing Jesus-followers. The sound of rushing wind. The appearance of tongues of fire. The disciples speaking like well-trained, Lutheran Bible translators. Indeed, "*What does this mean?*"

## **Are We Prepared to Love the Nations?**

We know at least this much: God loves the nations. He loves Iraqis, Somalians, Israelis, New Zealanders, Hondurans, Arabs, Africans, Hispanics, Americans. (All of these nationalities are now found all over the world.) He has a blood-red passion to harvest His children—the lost, least, and lonely—from every jungle, neighborhood, village, city, rural area, tenement, suburb, and slum. And for whatever reason, He desires to use us to accomplish His purposes. God spoke through Isaiah: "I will also make You a light of the nations So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Is 49:6). And David commanded in Psalm 96: "Sing to the LORD a new song; Sing to the LORD, all the earth. . . . Proclaim good tidings of His salvation from day to day. Tell of His glory among the nations, His wonderful deeds among all the peoples" (vv. 1–3).

God longs to have His "*mighty deeds*" proclaimed in the almost seven thousand languages that exist in the world today, many of which are spoken in the United States, the third largest mission field in the world. He wants His love demonstrated and proclaimed and His grace and mercy clearly and convincingly explained to subcultures as well: whether the Bedouins of the Judean wilderness or the cowboys of West Texas; whether the red-necks of \_\_\_\_\_ (you name the place—because they are everywhere) or the white collars of Wall Street. He has a heart for the addicted, the sex-trafficked, their pimps, and all who have ever lusted.

Get this: *He loves sinners* (thank God) and He has graced and privileged us to be His voice. God equips and gifts His followers to cross cultures, generations, languages, and dialects—and to touch hearts. He teaches us the vocabulary of distant lands, the dialect of the discouraged neighbor, the vernacular of the lonely heart, the idiom of the young, and how to love and communicate with the millennial, Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z generations.

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Friends, we cannot miss this opportunity to discover “our language” and celebrate these opportunities.

According to His sovereignty, God has formed us each uniquely and shaped our hearts individually (Ps 33:15) to show forth His glory (proclaiming His “mighty deeds”). For who or what, does your heart break and when does your pulse race? When you spot the homeless? When you travel to the inner city? For the boisterous, but struggling, fellow-worker? For hurting, broken, and beleaguered families? For the gay couple that lives next door? For those whom you perceive to be illegal immigrants living in areas you pass every week on your way to and from worship?

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Think through Paul’s inquiry carefully: “How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Rom 10:14). Is it possible that you have been chosen to speak of Jesus and His love . . . by God, in eternity, as but one of the good works you perform as His perfect workmanship? (Cf. Eph 2:10)

Have you asked, “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:17–19)?

Have you prayed that God, who still performs “mighty deeds” and who “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us” (Eph 3:20), would use you to reach the lost, least, and lonely as His light in your world?

May I encourage you to do so; and may the Holy Spirit embolden and empower you to proclaim and demonstrate the “mighty deeds” of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit! Indeed, “to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Eph 3:21).

s.D.g.